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Different duration of at-risk mental state associated with neurofunctional abnormalities – A multimodal imaging study

Authors: Renata Smieskova[1,2], Paul Allen[3], Andor Simon[4,5], Jacqueline Aston[1], Kerstin Bendfeldt[2], Jürgen Drewe[7], Kerstin Gruber[4], Ute Gschwandtner[1], Markus Klarhoefer[6], Claudia Lenz[6], Klaus Scheffler[6], Rolf D Stieglitz[1], Philip McGuire[3], Anita Riecher-Rössler[1], Stefan J Borgwardt[1,2,3] and FEPSY study group

Author Affiliations:

1. Psychiatric Outpatient Department, Psychiatric University Clinics Basel, c/o University Hospital Basel, Petersgraben 4, 4031 Basel, Switzerland

2. Medical Image Analysis Centre, University Hospital Basel, Switzerland

3. King's College London, Institute of Psychiatry, Department of Psychosis Studies, De Crespigny Park, London SE5 8AF, United Kingdom

4. Specialised Outpatient Service for Early Psychosis, Department of Psychiatry, Bruderholz, Switzerland

5. University Hospital of Psychiatry, University of Bern, 3010 Bern

6. Radiological Physics, University Hospital Basel, Switzerland

7. Department of Gastroenterology, University Hospital Basel, Switzerland

Corresponding author:

Dr Stefan J Borgwardt,

Psychiatric University Clinics,

c/o University Hospital Basel,

Petersgraben 4,

4031 Basel,

Switzerland,

Telephone: 004161 3286126,

Fax: 004161 2654588,

E-mail address: sborgwardt@uhbs.ch

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Neurofunctional alterations are correlates of vulnerability to psychosis, as well as of the disorder itself. However, neurofunctional abnormalities within the ARMS, and how they relate to different probabilities for later transition to psychosis is unclear. We investigated neurofunctional abnormalities during working memory processing in individuals with an at-risk mental state (ARMS).

Experimental design: Patients with 'first-episode psychosis' (FEP, n=21), short-term ARMS (ARMS-ST, n=17), long-term ARMS (ARMS-LT, n=16), and healthy controls (HC, n=20) were investigated with an n-back working memory task. We examined functional (fMRI) and structural magnetic resonance imaging (sMRI) data in conjunction using Biological Parametric Mapping (BPM) toolbox.

Principal observations: There were no differences in accuracy, but the FEP and the ARMS-ST group had longer reaction times compared to the HC and the ARMS-LT group. With the 2-back>0-back contrast we found reduced functional activation in ARMS-ST and FEP compared to the HC group in parietal and middle frontal regions. Relative to ARMS-LT individuals, FEP patients showed decreased activation in the bilateral inferior frontal gyrus and insula, and in the left prefrontal cortex. Compared to the ARMS-LT, the ARMS-ST subjects showed reduced activation in the right inferior frontal gyrus and insula. Reduced insular and prefrontal activation was associated with gray matter volume reduction in the same area in the ARMS-LT group.

Conclusions: These findings suggest that vulnerability to psychosis was associated with neurofunctional alterations in fronto-temporo-parietal networks in a working memory task. Neurofunctional differences within the ARMS were related to different duration of the prodromal state and resilience factors.

Keywords:

ultra-high-risk (UHR), at-risk mental state (ARMS), schizophrenia, working memory, fMRI

INTRODUCTION

Neurofunctional alterations are a leading feature of psychosis. To date, it is not clear to what extent these abnormalities correlate with vulnerability to psychosis or pathology of the disorder itself. However, for the understanding of their pathogeneses it is important to clarify their onset and time course of the dynamic neurobiological processes underlying the transition from a high-risk state to manifest psychosis.

Working memory (WM) impairment is one of the most pronounced cognitive features found in schizophrenia (Callicott et al., 2003b; Cannon et al., 2005; Forbes et al., 2009; Glahn et al., 2005; Jansma et al., 2004; Johnson et al., 2006; Manoach et al., 2000; Menon et al., 2001; Schneider et al., 2007). Impairments in the WM network activation depend on the individual performance, higher performing patients with schizophrenia showed hyper-activation and lower performing patients showed hypo-activation what was explained using the compensation model of activation (Sanz et al., 2009). However, the relation of physiological and clinical variables (positive, negative symptoms) is complicated by the multidimensional nature of psychotic symptoms. Recent advances in psychiatric research indicate that neurocognitive deficits are also evident in subjects with an at-risk mental state (ARMS) (Eastvold et al., 2007; Pflueger et al., 2007; Simon et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2006) and in non-affected first-degree relatives (Karch et al., 2009; Karlsgodt et al., 2007; Lee et al., 2010a; MacDonald et al., 2009; Meda et al., 2008; Spence et al., 2000).

The ARMS is defined according to the PACE (Personal Assessment and Crisis Evaluation Clinic, Melbourne) criteria and requires individuals to present attenuated positive psychotic or brief limited intermittent symptoms that do not reach full psychosis threshold (Riecher-Rossler et al., 2007; Riecher-Rossler et al., 2009; Yung et al., 2004) or functional decline.

These psychopathological symptoms are often associated with negative (Lencz et al., 2004; Riecher-Rossler et al., 2009) symptoms, subtle cognitive deficits (Brewer et al., 2006; Riecher-Rossler et al., 2009) and include deficits in working memory function (Broome et al., 2010; Simon et al., 2007). Those with the ARMS have a 20–40% probability of developing the psychosis (Riecher-Rossler et al., 2007; Riecher-Rossler et al., 2009; Yung et al., 1998). Furthermore, neurofunctional deficits may be associated with transition to psychosis and thus can be seen as vulnerability markers for developing schizophrenia (Morey et al., 2005; Riecher-Rossler et al., 2009).

Over the past decade, structural (sMRI) and functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) methods have been extensively employed to identify the anatomical and neurofunctional alterations in the pre-psychotic phases. In subjects at high-risk for psychosis, MRI studies showed structural abnormalities (Borgwardt et al., 2007a; Borgwardt et al., 2008; Borgwardt et al., 2006; Borgwardt et al., 2007b; Koutsouleris et al., 2009; Meisenzahl et al., 2008; Pantelis et al., 2003; Witthaus et al., 2009) and neurofunctional deficits in the frontal and temporal task-related networks (Allen et al., 2010; Fusar-Poli et al., 2007), especially during working memory tasks (Broome et al., 2010; Broome et al., 2009; Pauly et al., 2010). Such alterations are not only attributable to the effects of illness or treatment and may represent markers of vulnerability to psychosis (Smieskova et al., 2010).

Since 1999, the Early Detection of Psychosis Clinic (FEPSY) in Basel recruited and followed up the ARMS individuals over up to 7 years (Riecher-Rossler et al., 2009). Importantly, 19 of those 21 ARMS individuals who made transition, transit in the first two years after their ascertainment. Afterwards, only 2 out of 53 included ARMS individuals made transition to psychosis (Riecher-Rossler et al., 2009) representing a reduced transition probability. Similarly, the vast majority of transitions occur in the first two years (estimated

hazard ratio 0.58) and significantly dropped over time (estimated hazard ratio 0.07) (Yung et al., 2007). In the present study, we therefore investigated the ARMS individuals with a short or long duration of the ARMS. All these individuals fulfil the ARMS criteria (similar to the PACE criteria) at the time of scan. In the first group (short-term ARMS, ARMS-ST), the scan was done at the time of ascertainment of the ARMS (within 3 months on average). In the second group (long-term ARMS, ARMS-LT), the scan was done after 2 years, on average 4.5 years of follow-up with no transition to psychosis. At the time of the scan in the latter group, the assessment of the ARMS was repeated and PACE criteria were still met. We thus investigated two ARMS subgroups both representing vulnerability to psychosis with different probabilities of later transition to psychosis. It is important to emphasise that also ARMS-LT group continue to meet ARMS criteria at the time of scan. This group is therefore clearly on the risk continuum to develop psychosis, but according to the published data has lower probability to develop subsequent psychosis than ARMS-ST. In this context, we aimed to examine the neurofunctional brain abnormalities associated with higher vs. lower probability of developing psychosis. This could improve our understanding of the neurofunctional changes in the mental state in early stages in the context of clinical staging model (McGorry et al., 2009).

Until now, there is a small number of fMRI studies in people with an ARMS (Broome et al., 2010; Broome et al., 2009; Fusar-Poli et al., 2010a; Fusar-Poli et al., 2010b) investigating neurofunctional abnormalities while performing a working memory task.

Expanding previous study (Broome et al., 2009), here we investigated an ARMS-LT group with a lower probability of developing psychosis compared to the ARMS-ST group (Yung et al., 2007).

Additionally, we focused on functional and structural differences between individuals with vulnerability to develop psychosis and already psychotic individuals (patients with first-episode psychosis, FEP).

On the basis of previous findings (Broome et al., 2009), we tested the following hypotheses:

1. The WM-specific activation would be diminished in parallel with the clinical status (ARMS-LT<ARMS-ST<FEP) compared to the healthy control (HC) group.

2. The ARMS-ST group would show more functional deficits associated with volumetric abnormalities compared to the ARMS-LT group.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Subjects

MRI data were collected as part of a research programme on early detection of psychosis that is described in detail elsewhere (Riecher-Rossler et al., 2006). Briefly, we recruited subjects with an ARMS and patients experiencing a FEP in our specialised clinic for the early detection of psychosis at the Psychiatric Outpatient Department, Psychiatric University Clinics Basel, Switzerland.

The entire group of individuals with an ARMS (ARMS-ST and ARMS-LT; n=33) corresponds to the criteria by Yung (Yung et al., 1998) employed in previous MRI studies (Borgwardt et al., 2007a; Borgwardt et al., 2007b; Pantelis et al., 2003; Sun et al., 2009; Takahashi et al., 2009a; Takahashi et al., 2009b; Velakoulis et al., 2006; Walterfang et al., 2008; Wood et al., 2003; Wood et al., 2005). All the ARMS individuals were assessed at the time of MRI scan. Inclusion thus required one or more of the following a) "attenuated" psychotic symptoms b) brief limited intermittent psychotic symptoms (BLIPS) or c) a first

degree relative with a psychotic disorder plus at least two indicators of a clinical change, such as a marked decline in social or occupational functioning.

We divided the ARMS individuals into two subgroups depending on the duration of the ARMS status since its first presentation. The ARMS-ST group had the MRI scan as soon as practicable, on average within 3 months after ascertainment. The ARMS-LT group comprise of individuals who did not convert to psychosis over a longer follow up period of on average 4.5 years after first ascertainment. The mean duration of follow up of ARMS-ST subjects was 2.88 months (SD=5.24), with one individual who developed psychosis. The mean follow up time since presentation in ARMS-LT subgroup was 55.44 months (SD=24.72). At time of scanning all the ARMS-ST and ARMS-LT individuals still fulfilled the criteria by Yung et al. for ARMS (Riecher-Rossler et al., 2008; Yung et al., 1998) but had different probabilities of developing psychosis (Cannon et al., 2008; Riecher-Rossler et al., 2009; Yung et al., 2008).

During follow-up, the ARMS-ST and ARMS-LT subjects received psychiatric case management without any antipsychotic treatment. All the ARMS individuals (from both groups) were antipsychotic-naïve, except for one subjects who was at the time of scanning antipsychotic-free (olanzapine 2.5 mg/day for 9 months; 4 months before the scan) and two currently medicated ARMS-LT subjects (1 zuclopenthixol 3x40 mg/day, and 1 aripiprazole 5mg/day, for unknown period prescribed for treatment of negative symptoms from their physician). Furthermore, 8 of ARMS-LT and 6 of ARMS-ST were receiving antidepressants at the time of the MRI scan.

The FEP patients (n=21) were defined as subjects who met the operational criteria for ‘first-episode psychosis’(Breitborde, 2009). Inclusion required scores of 4 or above on the hallucination item or 5 or above on the unusual thought content, suspiciousness or

conceptual disorganisation items of the BPRS (Yung et al., 1998). The symptoms must have occurred at least several times a week and persisted for more than one week. Most of our FEP patients were not receiving medication (7 of them antipsychotic-naïve, 6 antipsychotic-free) at time of scanning. Eight FEP patients were receiving antipsychotics at the time of scanning for approximately 2 months (5 quetiapine and 2 paliperidone for less than 6 months, 1 olanzapine for less than 2 years).

We assessed subjects using the 'Basel Screening Instrument for Psychosis' (BSIP) (Riecher-Rossler et al., 2008; Riecher-Rossler et al., 2007), the Brief Psychiatric Rating Scale (BPRS)(Lukoff et al., 1986), the Scale for the Assessment of Negative Symptoms (SANS)(Andreasen, 1989) and the Global Assessment of Functioning (GAF). The BSIP evaluates 'prodromal' symptoms (defined according to the Diagnosis and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder, DSM-III-R) occurring in the last 5 years; nonspecific 'prodromal' signs (Riecher-Rossler et al., 2007) in the last 2 years; previous or current psychotic symptoms, psychosocial functioning over the last 5 years, substance dependency; and psychotic disorders among first and second degree relatives (Riecher-Rossler et al., 2008) . We obtained current and previous psychotropic medication, alcohol, nicotine, cannabis, and other illegal drug consumption using a semi-structured interview adapted from Early Psychosis Prevention and Intervention Centre (EPPIC) Drug and Alcohol Assessment Schedule (www.eppic.org.au).

We applied the following exclusion criteria to both these groups: history of previous psychotic disorder; psychotic symptomatology secondary to an 'organic' disorder; substance abuse according to ICD-10 research criteria; psychotic symptomatology associated with an affective psychosis or a borderline personality disorder; age under 18 years; inadequate knowledge of the German language; and IQ (Lehrl et al., 1995) less than 70.

We recruited healthy volunteers (HC, n=20) from the same geographical area as the other groups. All subjects were representative of the local population of individuals presenting with an ARMS or FEP in terms of age, gender, handedness, and alcohol and cannabis consumption. These individuals had no current psychiatric disorder, no history of psychiatric illness, head trauma, neurological illness, serious medical or surgical illness, substance abuse, and no family history of any psychiatric disorder as assessed by an experienced psychiatrist in a detailed clinical semi-structured interview.

Magnetic resonance image acquisition

Functional MRI

We acquired the n-back task elicited images on a 3 T scanner (Siemens Magnetom Verio, Siemens Healthcare, Erlangen, Germany) using an echo planar sequence with a repetition time (TR) of 2.5 s, echo time (TE) of 28 ms, matrix 76x76, 126 volumes and 38 slices with 0.5 mm interslice gap, providing a resolution of 3x3x3 mm^3, and a field of view (FOV) 228x228 cm^2. With an inter-stimulus interval of 2 seconds, all subjects saw the series of black letters on the white background in a prismatic mirror. Each stimulus was presented for 2 seconds. During a baseline (0-back) condition, subjects were required to press the button with the right hand when the letter „X" appeared. During 1-back and 2-back conditions, participants were instructed to press the button if the currently presented letter was the same as that presented 1 (1-back condition) or 2 (2-back condition) trials beforehand. The three conditions were presented in 10 alternating 30 s blocks (2 x 1-back, 3 x 2-back and 5 x 0-back) matched for the number of target letters per block (i.e. 2 or 3), in a pseudo-random order. The reaction times and response accuracy were recorded on-line.

Structural MRI

For anatomical imaging a 3D T1-weighted MPRAGE sequence was applied with 1x1x1 mm^3 isotropic spatial resolution and with inversion time of 1000 ms, TR of 8 ms and TE of 3.4 ms. All scans were screened for gross radiological abnormalities by an experienced neuroradiologist. Five individuals were not included to the analyses due to arachnoidal cysts, cavernom, cerebellar atrophy and T2 hyperintensities(Borgwardt et al., 2006).

Image analysis

We analyzed functional MRI data using the Statistical Parametric Mapping software package (SPM8; Wellcome Department of Cognitive Neurology, London, United Kingdom). All volumes were realigned to the first volume, corrected for motion artefacts, mean adjusted by proportional scaling, normalized into standard stereotactic space (template provided by the Montreal Neurological Institute), and smoothed using a 8 mm full-width-at half-maximum (FWHM) Gaussian kernel. After exclusion of error trials, we convolved the onset times for each trial in seconds with a canonical haemodynamic response function.

We pre-processed all structural images with the Voxel-Based Morphometry (VBM8) toolbox (http://dbm.neuro.uni-jena.de/vbm8/) implemented in SPM8. It utilizes New Segmentation and DARTEL methods in SPM8. We modulated the segmented tissue maps of gray matter (GM) with the Jacobian determinants from the spatial normalization to correct for volume changes. We chose the option ’modulation of non-linear effects only‘, which equals the use of default modulation (of both affine and non-linear effects) and globally scaling data according to the inverse scaling factor due to affine normalization. Finally, we smoothed the modulated GM images with an 8-mm FWHM Gaussian kernel.

Integration of multimodal imaging data

We chose the multimodal integrative image analysis to determine if brain abnormalities in working memory were associated with volumetric abnormalities in ARMS-ST, ARMS-LT and FEP individuals. We used Biological Parametric Mapping (BPM) (Casanova et al., 2007) toolbox, developed in Matlab and visualized our results in SPM8. Using 1st level 2-back>0-back contrast images, we provided BPM Analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) analyses with all 4 groups in one model. The fMRI data were the primary modality and the corresponding VBM data the imaging covariates. We evaluated the impact of the group structural differences on the fMRI data on a voxel-wise basis with gray matter volume (GMV) as a regressor. To account for age- and sex-specific associations (Elsabagh et al., 2009) we used age and gender as covariates in the ANCOVA model. We have run the integrative analyses twice, one with and one without GMV as covariate to find the regions where the group differences were lost due to this covariation. We chose 2-back>0-back contrasts as attention-independent modality with higher load level to search differences across groups. To specify the WM-associated network of activation, we used the 'main-effect of n-back task' (full-factorial model; $p<0.001$, FWE-corrected) as a mask for 2nd level analyses. The correlation between the blood oxygen level-dependent (BOLD) signal and GMV was calculated on a voxel-by-voxel basis with the BPM correlation model (Casanova et al., 2007).

Statistical significance was assessed at the cluster-level using the non-stationary random field theory(Hayasaka et al., 2004). The first step of this cluster-level inference strategy consisted of identifying spatially contiguous voxels at a threshold of $p<0.01$, uncorrected (cluster-forming threshold)(Petersson et al., 1999). Finally, a family-wise error (FWE) corrected cluster-extent threshold of $p<0.05$ was defined in order to infer statistical significance. To

provide sufficient details about the present study, we followed the guidelines for reporting an fMRI study (Poldrack et al., 2008).

To label the regions of brain activation MNI coordinates were transformed into Talairach space (www.ebire.org/hcnlab/cortical-mapping; Talairach Daemon software; (Mai JK, 2008)).

Statistical analysis of demographic data

We examined clinical and socio-demographic differences between groups using one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), F-test, or chi-square test (Table 1). For post-hoc analyses we used the least-significant difference (LSD) test. Statistical analyses were performed with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 16.0).

RESULTS

Clinical and demographic characteristics of the sample

There were no significant differences among our groups with respect to age (P=0.177), gender (P=0.245), handedness (P=0.638), IQ (P=0.166), current alcohol (P=0.247) and cannabis (P=0.489) consumption. There were significant between group differences in positive and negative symptoms, and in global functioning over all our groups. The FEP group had more positive symptoms than ARMS-ST (P=0.006), ARMS-LT (P<0.001) and HC (P<0.001) groups. The ARMS-ST group showed a higher BPRS (P=0.018) and SANS (P=0.015) and a lower GAF (P<0.0001) score compared to the ARMS-LT (Table 1).

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

N-back task performance

There was no difference in the accuracy in any of conditions. Reaction times differed significantly between the FEP compared to the HC and ARMS-LT groups and between ARMS-ST compared to the HC and ARMS-LT groups (Supplementary table 1).

Gray matter volumes (VBM results)

The FEP group showed reduced GMV in the anterior cingulo-prefrontal, hippocampal, and occipito-cerebellar regions, compared to HC group ($P<0.01$). Compared to the ARMS-LT, the FEP group had temporo-insular volumetric reductions ($P<0.005$). Compared to the ARMS-ST group, FEP had reduced volumes in the fronto-parietal and occipital regions ($P<0.05$). Both the ARMS-ST and ARMS-LT groups had anterior cingular and frontal volumetric reductions compared to the HC group ($P<0.05$). There was more GMV in insula in the ARMS-LT group compared to the HC group. The ARMS-ST showed volumetric reductions in the temporal gyrus extending into insula, compared to the ARMS-LT group (Supplementary table 2).

N-back fMRI results

Main effect of task

The main effect of task (2-back>0-back) in all 74 subjects delineates the network of activated areas independent of group. We used this task effect as a mask to constrain subsequent group analyses to a working memory network (Supplementary figure).

Integrative image analysis using functional and structural imaging modalities

Vulnerability-associated abnormalities of developing psychosis

The ARMS-ST group differed from the HC group in activation in the bilateral superior and right inferior parietal lobule (P<0.0001), and in the left superior frontal gyrus (P<0.05; Table 2, Figure 1). The ARMS-LT group showed no significant functional differences compared to the HC group.

FIGURE 1 AND TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Psychosis-associated abnormalities

The FEP group showed less brain activation in the bilateral precuneus extending into superior parietal lobule and in the left superior and middle frontal gyrus (P<0.0001) compared to the HC group. Compared to the ARMS-LT, the FEP group showed reduced activation in the bilateral inferior frontal gyrus and insula, in the left superior frontal gyrus, and in the middle frontal gyrus (P<0.01; Table 2, Figure 2). Correlation analyses in the FEP individuals under BPM confirmed a negative interaction between BOLD response and GMV in right precuneus (36 -72 44; P=0.032). There were no significant differences in brain activation in the FEP group compared to the ARMS-ST group.

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Neurofunctional abnormalities associated with high probability to develop psychosis

Compared to the ARMS-LT, the ARMS-ST subjects showed reduced activation in the right inferior frontal gyrus extending into insula (p<0.05) and in the left superior frontal gyrus, insula and bilateral precuneus (p<0.1) (Figure 3, Table 2). There was a positive correlation between

BOLD response and GMV in left precuneus (-28 -72 24; P=0.003) in the ARMS-ST group; and in right insula (42 -18 -10; P=0.015), left inferior frontal gyrus (-32 32 -18; P=0.002), and in right lingual gyrus (32 -72 -12; P=0.0001) in ARMS-LT group.

FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

Effects of antipsychotic medication on neurofunctional activation

The analyses were repeated after exclusion of all subjects on antipsychotic medication. With exception of one cluster in the right middle frontal gyrus that lost its significance, the same set of regions showed significant differences between the FEP and HC groups. The differences in brain activation between FEP and ARMS-LT groups remained unchanged with one new significant cluster appearing in the left subthalamic and lentiform nuclei (-10 -14 -6). The results of repeated analyses in ARMS-ST and ARMS-LT groups showed no differences in brain activations (Table 2).

DISCUSSION

With a multimodal image analysis we investigated individuals at high-risk of psychosis and patients with the established illness in order to differentiate between vulnerability-associated and psychosis-associated abnormalities in the neural substrate of working memory function. Comparing ARMS-ST and HC revealed that vulnerability to psychosis was associated with a reduced activation in the bilateral superior and inferior parietal lobules as well as in the left superior frontal gyrus. Compared to ARMS-LT individuals, those with the ARMS-ST showed reduced activation in the right insula and inferior frontal gyrus. Comparing the FEP

patients to the ARMS-LT subjects revealed that frank psychosis was associated with reduced activation in the bilateral inferior frontal gyrus extending into insula, and in left superior, inferior and middle frontal gyri.

We recorded the time from the first presentation of subjects with ARMS and divided them into two subgroups comparable with the new staging model for psychosis (McGorry et al., 2009). The mean duration of the ARMS was 4.5 years in the ARMS-LT group; thus the probability that any of these subjects would develop psychosis in the future was rather low (Cannon et al., 2008; Riecher-Rossler et al., 2009). In the ARMS-ST subjects, we expect a transition rate of approximately 30% (Mechelli A, 2010; Riecher-Rossler et al., 2009) in the next one–two years. Splitting the ARMS subjects into two groups allows a better understanding of a real subsequent probability to develop psychosis. This may help to investigate psychosis-associated functional abnormalities in the FEP (individuals with psychosis itself) in contrast to the ARMS-LT (individuals with vulnerability but very low transition probability to psychosis). This particular comparison removes any psychosis specific effects (inherent in the 30% of ARMS who might transit) making the ARMS-LT versus FEP comparison a 'purer' contrast to psychosis. The ARMS-ST group with 30% probability to develop psychosis subsequently was a basis to investigate vulnerability connected with higher transition probability-associated changes in brain activation compared to the HC. Interestingly, our ARMS-LT did not differ from the ARMS-ST with respect to age, even included longer time ago in ARMS. This could be because of small sample sizes and needs further investigation. On the other hand, the difference between ARMS-ST and ARMS-LT are not attributable to the effect of aging in one of those groups. We can speculate that the differences between these two groups in the n-back activation network showed not

only disrupted function in the ARMS-ST group, but resilience or protective processes in the ARMS-LT group.

The present study was powered to detect group effects on activation rather than on task performance. However, the two ARMS groups showed differences in reaction times during the most demanding condition. The FEP and ARMS-ST groups needed longer during 2-back condition compared to the HC and the ARMS-LT groups. According to the previously published studies (Delawalla et al., 2008; Sanz et al., 2009) the FEP and ARMS-ST groups might be lower performing and show prefrontal hypo-activation. However, it may be because all group contrasts were based on 2-back > 0-back condition, it means when the task gets harder. Thus, the compensation model might predict hypo-activation (Callicott et al., 2003b) due to a ceiling effect of "going downwards on the inverted U-shaped curve". Individuals with more psychotic symptoms (FEP, ARMS-ST) thus could reach the peak of the inverted U-curve sooner than less symptomatic (ARMS-LT and HC) individuals. Apart from that the behavioural differences may be due to attentional impairments seen in schizophrenia patients (Karch et al., 2009), the symptom severity, and medication. Previous studies report impaired working memory performance in the ARMS (Eastvold et al., 2007; Pflueger et al., 2007), although other studies find no effect on task performance (Broome et al., 2010; Broome et al., 2009; Fusar-Poli et al., 2010a; Fusar-Poli et al., 2010b). However, functional neuroimaging techniques are able to detect physiological changes, and are likely to be more sensitive than behavioural measures (Wilkinson and Halligan, 2004). Furthermore, the image analyses were restricted to correct responses and the observed differential activations reflect differences at the neurophysiological level and not on task performance.

Overall, we found working memory-associated activations in the prefrontal and parietal cortex in all our subjects during WM task, corresponding to previously published data of patients with an ARMS (Broome et al., 2009; Fusar-Poli et al., 2010a) and psychosis (Callicott et al., 2003a; Callicott et al., 2003b; Forbes et al., 2009). Vulnerability-associated functional abnormalities in the superior frontal gyrus and in parietal lobules distinguished the ARMS-ST from HC group and corresponded to the previous fMRI studies with altered prefrontal brain activation (Fusar-Poli et al., 2009; Fusar-Poli et al., 2010b) for review see reference (Fusar-Poli et al., 2007). Compared to the HC, both the ARMS-ST and ARMS-LT groups showed reduced GMV in the anterior cingulate, middle and inferior frontal gyri. These findings are similar to the published volumetric abnormalities found in ARMS (Borgwardt et al., 2008; Borgwardt et al., 2007b; Fornito et al., 2008; Koutsouleris et al., 2009; Meisenzahl et al., 2008; Pantelis et al., 2003; Sun et al., 2009). Interestingly, we found probably compensatory more GMV in insula in the ARMS-LT compared to the HC group.

The neurofunctional reduction in the ARMS-ST versus ARMS-LT group revealed the difference between the higher and lower transition probability. Only one cluster in the right inferior frontal gyrus and insula distinguished these two groups after covarying for gray matter volume. Furthermore, reduced activation in the left inferior frontal gyrus, the right insula, and in the bilateral precuneus positively correlated with volumetric deficits in these regions within the ARMS-LT and ARMS-ST individuals, respectively. A previous study by Fusar-Poli et al. (Fusar-Poli et al., 2010a) showed that the prefrontal functional abnormalities in ARMS are related to GMV. Our results are comparable to the prefrontal abnormalities found in ARMS (Fusar-Poli et al., 2010a) and to the altered function found in precuneus in unaffected siblings of schizophrenia patients (Liu et al., 2010). Furthermore, reduced GMV

in the right temporal gyrus and insula delineate the difference between the ARMS-ST and the ARMS-LT group. These are the regions known to be different in ARMS with and without subsequent transition to psychosis (Borgwardt et al., 2007b).

Comparing the FEP with ARMS-LT individuals, we observed functional differences in the bilateral inferior frontal gyrus and insula, and in left superior and middle frontal gyrus, that may delineate psychosis-associated changes. These functional alterations during the WM task resemble those reported previously in schizophrenia patients in prefrontal (Barch et al., 2001; Cannon et al., 2005; Johnson et al., 2006; Manoach et al., 2000; Manoach et al., 1999; Menon et al., 2001; Perlstein et al., 2001; Tan et al., 2005), and temporal (Fusar-Poli et al., 2007; Glahn et al., 2005; Karch et al., 2009; Schneider et al., 2007) regions. In agreement with our hypothesis, the ARMS-LT and the ARMS-ST groups showed more WM-related activation than the FEP and less than the HC group. We found neither neurofunctional nor behavioural differences between FEP and ARMS-ST group. Taking into account 20-30 % transition probability to the psychosis, the major part of this group will subsequently belong to the ARMS-LT group, physiologically different from the FEP group. We can deduce that the ARSM-LT group has not only lower transition probability (based on the published longitudinal study (Riecher-Rossler et al., 2009)) but as well some resilience factors, which helped those individuals to avoid the imminent psychosis.

The ARMS is understood as a dynamic process (Simon and Umbricht, 2010; Yung et al., 2010) concerning structural and functional brain abnormalities (Fusar-Poli et al., 2007), disrupted cellular integrity and connectivity (Green, 2007), and other still unknown factors. We showed that neurofunctional abnormalities are associated with structural deficits in the ARMS-ST and ARMS-LT groups, as they changed its significance in insular and inferior

and superior frontal regions after covarying for GMV. Using a well-established working memory paradigm, we found functional vulnerability-associated abnormalities in a fronto-parietal network, whereas abnormalities associated with psychosis itself in frontal and insular brain activations. We presume that dynamic processes in task-relevant regions underline positive functional-structural correlation in the early stages of ARMS (ARMS-ST, ARMS-LT) and the negative correlation in the FEP group. It remains unknown, whether functional abnormalities precede the structural ones, how reversible they are, and if they are compensatory in their nature. In future, a multimodal approach combining fMRI and sMRI results with connectivity measurements or combining optical and genetic techniques(Lee et al., 2010b) could help to improve understanding of neural circuits underlying psychosis and ARMS.

The neurofunctional abnormalities we observed could not directly be attributed to antipsychotic treatment, as all of the ARMS-ST were antipsychotic-naïve and only 12% of the ARMS-LT had antipsychotic treatment at the time of scanning. Although the exclusion of 38% antipsychotic-medicated FEP patients did not substantially change our results, we probably found a protective effect of antipsychotics in the subcortical structures. For all other comparisons after excluding medicated individuals from analyses the results remained largely unchanged. The influence of antipsychotics on the brain function is not entirely clear, however antipsychotics may affect neural activity (Lui et al., 2010) and GMV (Tost et al., 2010), especially in basal ganglia (Smieskova et al., 2009). Furthermore, all of those on antipsychotics were treated with atypical compounds in very low doses.

Some limitations of this study should be considered. Firstly, although one subject of the ARMS-ST group developed psychosis during the follow-up, the small sample size did not allow meaningful analyses regarding the clinical outcome. Secondly, our specific FEP population included mostly outpatients at the beginning of their disease with relatively high premorbid IQ values compared to chronically ill psychotic patients at a later stage of the illness (Urfer-Parnas et al., 2010). Thirdly, although the FEP group had less formal education than the other groups, this could not account for the differences between the ARMS-ST and ARMS-LT and control groups, which were matched regarding these aspects. Fourthly, although the ARMS-ST group has a higher probability of transition to psychosis, thus there is a non-transition probability of approximately 70%. The neurofunctional differences found in this group could be even more pronounced in the pure transition subgroup. Fifthly, we have not examined the association with an affective psychosis, borderline personality disorder or other comorbidities with the ARMS. Assessment of other psychopathological measures could lead to better distinction characteristics of ARMS-ST and ARMS-LT group. However, this was not the main aim of the study. Sixthly, we have not studied the default mode network independent of the WM-task and cannot thus exclude the anomalous network connectivity (Whitfield-Gabrieli et al., 2009) in included individuals. Such functional connectivity analysis could extend the understanding of ARMS-underlying processes. Finally, the pure transition group could show more pronounced differences, but the differences seen even at the very early beginning of the ARMS in ARMS-ST, showed us the regions playing the crucial role in the dynamic ARMS process.

CONCLUSION

In this study we found distinct patterns of mnemonic neurofunctional brain activation related to vulnerability to psychosis as opposed to psychosis itself. Neurofunctional alterations in fronto-parietal regions may be correlates of vulnerability to psychosis whereas more pronounced neurofunctional abnormalities in prefrontal cortex were associated with the presence of psychosis. Our results thus confirm the hypothesis of a disrupted working memory network during the development of psychosis. Additionally, neurofunctional differences within the ARMS were related to different duration of ARMS. These abnormalities were directly related to volumetric reduction.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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FIGURE LEGENDS

Figure 1: Vulnerability-associated group differences in activation.

The crosses show the peak area of different activation between the ARMS-ST and the HC groups. Clusters in the bilateral superior parietal lobule (x=-8; y=-64; z=48; voxels=2738, panel A), in the left superior frontal gyrus (-12 0 62; voxels=312, panel B), and in the right inferior and superior parietal lobule (48 -44 52; voxels=741, panel C) reflect decreased regional brain activation in the ARMS-ST as compared to the HC group during the 2-back>0-back task ($P<0.05$). Covarying for GMV had no effect on these results. The left side of the brain is shown on the left side of the images.

Figure 2: Psychosis-associated group differences in activation.

The crosses show the peak area of different activation between the FEP and the ARMS-LT groups. Clusters in the left inferior and orbital frontal gyrus and insula (x=-32; y=34; z=0; voxels=1568, panel A), in the left superior frontal gyrus (-14 0 60; voxels=402, panel B), and in the left inferior and middle frontal gyrus (-34 26 18; voxels=689, panel C) reflect decreased regional brain activation in the FEP as compared to the ARMS-LT group during the 2-back>0-back task ($P<0.01$). After covarying for GMV the cluster in the right inferior frontal gyrus and insula (26 22 2; voxels=406, panel D) became significant. The left side of the brain is shown on the left side of the images.

Figure 3: Group differences in brain activation between the ARMS-ST and the ARMS-LT groups.

The clusters reflect decreased regional brain activation in the right inferior frontal gyrus and insula (x=42; y=18; z=-4; voxels=303; P<0.05, panel A) and in bilateral precuneus (18 -78 48, voxels= 243, P<0.1, panel B) in ARMS-ST as compared to ARMS-LT group during the 2-back>0-back task. Covarying for GMV caused loss of significance in left superior frontal gyrus (-10 -4 66, voxels= 229, panel C), and in left insula (-38 14 0, voxels= 224, P<0.01, panel D). The left side of the brain is shown on the left side of the images.